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ABSTRACT

A study was done to examine the role of college student drinking games, the consequences of playing drinking games, and the motivational nuances involved in playing these games. A typology of drinking games is presented; it includes five categories: (1) consumption games (who can consume the most alcohol during a given event); (2) skill games (the player who fails to complete a certain feat must take a drink); (3) Intelligence Quotient games (physical skill and intellectual concentration are required); (4) unity games (played by close friends in a noncompetitive atmosphere); and (5) team games (teams pitted against each other in any of the above formats). Data for this study were derived from a lengthy period of participant observations at college student parties, conducted off campus. The observer also interviewed a sample of 20 male and 20 female game players about their behavior. Observation results found that both male and female players consumed significantly more alcohol than non-game players; 60 percent of males and 85 percent of females experienced negative consequences from playing; and both men and women reported that games played a role in their socializing with the opposite sex. A figure that illustrates the relationship of significant concepts in drinking game behavior is included. (7 references) (JB)

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College Drinking Games and Observed Consequences

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College Drinking Games and Observed Consequences

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Drinking games are a common phenomenon on college campuses but have received little analytical attention from social scientists.

In most drinking games the loser is forced to consume alcohol as a penalty. Winners of the games are those who are able to demonstrate the best drinking skills at the same time as negotiating the various tests and challenges allied to particular games (Hodges, 1989). While drinking games facilitate social interaction, they may also contribute to the serious legal, social, and health problems that have been associated with drinking (Newman, Crawford & Nellis, 1990).

A Common Practice

Douglas (1987) reported that 81% of a sample of students at Towson State had played drinking games before or after entering college. Thirteen percent played drinking games at least once a week, 15% twice a month and 35% played less than once a year.

Of a sample of first year students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln 70% of the males and 75% of the females had played a drinking game in the previous four weeks. A separate telephone survey of students on the same campus reported 38% of a sample of undergraduates had played drinking games in the previous four weeks.

Typically, more freshmen then upperclassmen play drinking games (Crawford & Nellis, 1988).

A Typology of Games

In an earlier paper we suggested a typology of drinking games that included five categories which provides a basis for a more informed discussion of these practices (Newman & Crawford, 1990). These categories are described below.

Consumption games: A competition to see who can consume the most alcohol in a given time or during a given event.

Skill games: If a player fails to perform a certain feat, the player is required to drink. If a player successfully performs the feat, then he/she decides who and possibly how much someone will drink.

IQ games: These games require physical skill and also a degree of intellectual concentration. Failure at the game results in being required to drink.

Unity games: Usually played by close friends in a noncompetitive atmosphere.

Team games: Pit one team against another in any combination of the first three types of games just described.

A Tentative Theory to Explain Drinking Game Participation

Our earlier work led to the development of a tentative theory of the motivation for playing drinking games (Newman & Crawford, 1990). This theory suggests that socializing is the central theme or priority.

For many, the initial motivation to participate in drinking and in drinking games is the need for social acceptance and interpersonal liking. If a person satisfies the need for acceptance relatively easily drinking games are of little significance. These individuals are represented by Line A in Figure 1. For these individuals, games quickly facilitate a sense of feeling good with no negative consequences. Feeling good is defined as the conceptual end point or objective of drinking behavior in this model. This initial facilitating of social contact is illustrated by the following quote:

> I find, and I am sure a lot of people will agree with me, that drinking games get a person involved with more people. If I'm at a party and everybody just stands in there own little group all night, you can't meet very many people. If someone starts a quarters games, more people will eventually join in. This way, everybody can mingle with everyone else.
>
> Drinking games bring a large group of people together and make it easier to talk with people you don't know. You feel like you belong when you are sitting at a

> quarters table and you also make some friends while talking to people during the game.

For others, however, a feeling of initial acceptance is followed by a need for what could be called "focused socializing": the need to strike a stronger bond with another person. When this is achieved, the need for continued participation in drinking games eases. (Figure 1, Line B)

For still others, the focused socializing is motivated by a desire to establish a degree of control over another person. In Figure 1, these individuals are represented by line C between focused socializing and feeling good. In this situation, individuals play the drinking game with the specific intent of controlling another's drinking, often with an ulterior or longer term objective. Frequently, this type of focused socializing involves males seeking and gaining control over females (Figure 1, Line C).

> . . . if I can control someone else's alcohol intake through a game, I can also control their physical well-being, their sexual behavior, and possibly their academic and/or job performance the next day.

Failure to achieve a meaningful relationship or a controlled relationship over someone else, often leads to continued attempts to achieve this "focused" relationship by continuing to play drinking games which in turn leads to intoxication (Fig. 1, Line D). Intoxication and the continued playing of drinking games in turn leads to many negative

outcomes recognized by all participants. However, the need to win acceptance and be liked or to gain a sense of control over someone else encourages continued trying, overriding the recognized negative consequences.

The negative outcomes can ultimately be blamed on drunkenness and therefore the individual involved does not feel they need to assume any responsibility for their actions. While they may not feel totally good about the negative outcomes, the fact that they can blame their failure on drunkenness allows them to "feel good," i.e., better than if they had to accept the total blame themselves.

Of course, there are those who drink and play drinking games for reasons other than socializing. The ulterior motive to get drunk is reflected by this statement:

> There is one purpose and only one purpose to drinking games and that is to get all those involved drunk.

The remainder of this paper explains the consequences of playing drinking games in an attempt to gain an understanding of the power of the nuances of the motives to play.

Data used here were derived from a lengthy period of participant observations at college student parties, conducted off campus. The observer was a female research associate in her early-30's who also interviewed a sample of drinking game players about the playing

experience. Twenty males and 20 female students aged 21-25 years of age were interviewed about their drinking game behavior.

Observed Consumption

To estimate consumption rates, 15 minute observations were made of male and female gameplayers and nongameplayers. Average consumption per 15 minutes for 63 male nongameplayers was 0.5 can (12 oz.) of beer and for 57 male gameplayers 1.5 cans (12 oz.) of beer. Male gameplayers consumed significantly more alcohol than nongameplayers.

Sixty-five female nongameplayers consumed an average of 0.3 can (12 oz.) of beer and 57 female gameplayers consumed an average of 1.8 cans (12 oz.) of beer per 15 minutes. Clearly, female gameplayers consumed significantly more alcohol than nongameplayers. While estimates of this type involve some error in estimates of quantity, the fact that female gameplayers drank as much or possibly more than male gameplayers is significant.

Self-Reported Consumption

Ninety-five percent of the males and 100% of the females stated they consumed more alcohol when they were playing a drinking game than when they weren't. Ninety percent of the males and 95% of the females also stated they did not know of any drinking games which did not increase consumption.

The following comments illustrate the feelings of the majority of students interviewed regarding the role of drinking games and alcohol consumption.

> I drink at least twice as much alcohol when I'm playing a drinking game. If there is not a drinking game going on beer is not that big of a deal.

> If I think there are going to be drinking games at a party I always ride with someone else or walk because I know I am going to end up drinking so much alcohol that if I got stopped by the police I would be a goner.

> I know I drink three times as much alcohol when I am playing a drinking game compared to when I am just sitting around talking and drinking.

> When playing a drinking game I probably drink more alcohol in a half hour than I do in a whole evening when I'm not playing.

Estimated Amounts Consumed

During formal interviews, a sample of 40 self-declared drinking gameplayers, who had not been observed playing drinking games were asked to estimate the quantity of alcohol consumed at their last drinking game. Male gameplayers estimated they consumed an average of 1.8 cans (12 oz.) of beer per 15 minutes and females 1.9 cans (12 oz.) of

beer per 15 minutes. All players were reporting on participating in the drinking game "Quarters." The similarity of these self-reported consumption rates to the independently observed rates was surprising.

A 2X3 ANOVA for sex by place of residence for the estimated amount of alcohol consumed in 15 minutes while playing quarters showed a significant difference. A simple main effect follow-up (Keppel, 1982) showed the difference to be between males and females living in residence halls with females again estimating their consumption to be higher than males.

Self-Reported Consequences

During the interviews each subject was asked if they had ever experienced a negative consequence from playing drinking games. Negative consequences were left undefined to allow the widest range of responses.

Sixty percent of the males and 85% of the females reported experiencing negative consequences due to drinking games. Of those who reported negative consequences, 67% of the males reported vomiting, as did 76% of the females. Fifty-eight percent of the males reported hangovers; 70% of the females reported hangovers. Fifty percent of the males and 41% of the females had missed class and 25% of the males and 48% of the females reported having passed out as a result of playing drinking games.

> I've been real sick before. I have a birth defect ulcer and when I drink to excess, especially with quarters, where you have to gulp the alcohol, I end up violently ill and throwing up a lot.
>
> I've missed a number of classes because I've stayed in a game too long.
>
> I'll never forget the night I swallowed a quarter. I could feel it going all the way down my throat.
>
> One night I got deathly sick and threw up so hard and so much that I popped the blood vessels in my eyes.
>
> Once I passed out after playing quarters and woke up in a guy's apartment that I didn't know.

Students not only reported the negative consequences they experienced but also the negative consequences they observed others experiencing as a result of drinking games. Ninety percent observed others vomiting,

> The worst thing about a drinking game is that a person can get picked on by everyone else at the table and that person may end up drinking the equivalent of a six-pack or more in less than fifteen minutes. I've come

> back in the morning to find vomit in the drinking fountain, on the floor and in the bathrooms.

Sixty-nine percent had witnessed others passed out:

> I've been at parties where five or six people are passed out on the floor from playing quarters and people just walk over them.

Fifty-nine percent had seen someone swallow a quarter:

> I've seen two people swallow quarters this summer. I've probably seen five or six swallowed in total. People look really funny while they are swallowing the quarter. They usually try to cough it back up and then someone starts to hit them on the back. Sometimes they end up vomiting.

Fifty-one percent had observed fights, 26% someone with a hangover, and 31% had observed property damage:

> The last party I was at a couple of guys got really drunk using a beer bong. I saw them kick out the walls of the kitchen.

Suggested Consequences

Focused socializing is frequently described in terms of males attempting to control females by involving the females in a drinking game like quarters to encourage excessive alcohol consumption. Subjects were asked "Why do men play drinking games?" Seventy percent of the men and 80% of the women responded "to meet women and/or impress them by showing how much they can drink." Twenty-five percent of the men and 10% of the women said men play drinking games to get women drunk and take advantage of them sexually. Twenty-five percent of the men and 40% of the women stated that men play drinking games to get drunk quickly. Both men and women spoke openly of the role drinking games play in socializing with the opposite sex. The following comments on why men play drinking games came from female interviewees:

> Men play drinking games to get females drunk so they can hit on them later.

> I know some men who play to get a particular woman drunk so they have a better chance of having sex with them later.

> Men liked the feeling of power and control they have over others when they are playing a drinking game.

Men had the following comments on why women play drinking games:

> Women play to impress guys and show them they aren't wimps. Some women like to prove they can consume as much alcohol as the guys. Women use it as an attention getter or to get harrassed. Some women want to be taken advantage of sexually.

> Certain girls play drinking games to loosen their inhibitions quicker so they can entice a guy they are interested in. They are probably really interested in sex but aren't good in a one person relationship. Girls don't usually get drunk once a week or twice a week like a guy. They want to get drunk once a month. When they decide this is the night to get drunk or maybe have sex a drinking game is a good way to accomplish both.

> When guys get girls involved in drinking games it makes it easier to pick up on them. Girls don't try to get guys drunk to the extent that guys try to get girls drunk. Guys want something, girls don't. Alcohol lowers a girl's defenses so she wants the same thing the guy wants.

Implications

Lifetime alcohol consumption rates peak in the college years. As a result, alcohol is the principal contributor in the premature deaths of young adults. Drinking games contribute to the likelihood that young adults, especially women, will consume dangerous quantities of alcohol. Despite the visibility of alcohol abuse as a public health problem and the wide recognition of drinking games, it is significant that so little attention has been paid to this practice by behavioral scientists.

In dealing with health issues it is important to remember that negative health behaviors can offer positive benefits to those engaging in the behavior. The act of playing drinking games, in addition to benefitting from the depressant effect of the alcohol, also provides a feeling of quickly fitting in and being accepted and liked. For some young people this is worth the risk of any negative consequences that may result.

The power of the motives to play drinking games, illustrated in this paper, is clear. The desire to play drinking games is so strong as to legitimize otherwise socially sanctioned behaviors such as vomiting, blacking out, missing class and destroying property.

The most surprising negative consequence resulting from this study were those related to male/female relationships. Some men openly discussed controlling women's alcohol consumption for a variety

of reasons including the possibility that an intoxicated woman was more likely to have sex.

Women discussed participating in drinking games out of a socializing need and a desire to be liked, and as one male said, "they are willing to be exploited as a means of achieving acceptance." Women in their desire to be accepted and liked used games as a way to facilitate drunkenness to enable them to do things they might normally not do. They may have recognized the costs, but like men, they could ultimately blame the alcohol rather than themselves for any untoward outcomes from the drinking game experience.

In our society women are not encouraged to openly express sexuality, and this probably contributes to the "opposite-sex games" that are played with alcohol. Women may feel that if they initiate sex or act sexually they will be perceived as "loose, a whore, or a slut." Men, however, have no such boundaries. Women feel that a viable alternative to being accepted and liked is to be sexual and that sexuality is facilitated with alcohol.

For those who labor on behalf of the public's health, it is clear that a better understanding of college drinking games and their consequences would be useful in the planning of prevention, early intervention and treatment programs. Alcohol abuse is linked to a wide range of health problems including accidents, violence, AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancies, and sexual assault. Added effort to understanding drinking game behavior would be a useful

contribution to understanding the epidemiology of each of these conditions.

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Figure 1
Relationship Of Significant Concepts In Explaining
Drinking Game Behavior